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PUBLIC EDITOR

The Public Editor Signs Off

Liz Spayd

THE PUBLIC EDITOR

JUNE 2, 2017

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Michael Putland/Getty Images

There probably hasn't been a time in recent American history when the role of the media was more important than now. The Trump administration is drowning in scandal, the country is calcified into two partisan halves. And large newsrooms are faced with a choice: to maintain an independent voice, but one as aggressive and unblinking as the days of Watergate. Or to morph into something more partisan, spraying ammunition at every favorite target and openly delighting in the chaos.

If I think back to one subject I've harped on the most as public editor over the last year, this is probably it. Digital disruption and collapsing business models get all the attention, but the prospect of major media losing its independence, and its influence, ranks equally high among the industry's perils. Derision may feel more satisfying, but in the long run stories that are measured in tone are more powerful. Whether journalists realize it or not, with impartiality comes authority — and right now it's in short supply.

Mike Morell, former acting director of the C.I.A. and a backer of Hillary Clinton, earlier this week [likened the U.S. media's reaction to Donald Trump to the Venezuelan media's reaction](#) when Hugo Chávez became president nearly 20 years ago. With little political opposition to Chávez, the media assumed that role, Morrell said, and ultimately lost its credibility with the Venezuelan people.

The U.S. isn't Venezuela but the media here shouldn't fall into the same trap. I don't worry that The Times, or The Washington Post or others with most resources will fail to pursue ripe investigative targets. And I hope so. But in their effort to hold Trump accountable, will they play their

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Friday Mailbag: Manchester, Stereotypes and Social Security Math

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the most reasonable way to pursue this investigative target. And I hope they do. But in their effort to hold Trump accountable, will they play their hands wisely and fairly? Or will they make reckless decisions and draw premature conclusions?

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And who will be watching, on this subject or anything else, if they don't acquit themselves well? At The Times, it won't be the public editor. As announced on Wednesday, [that position is being eliminated](#), making this my last column. Media pundits and many readers this week were questioning the decision to end this role, fearing that without it, no one will have the authority, insider perspective or ability to demand answers from top Times editors. There's truth in that. But it overlooks a larger issue.

It's not really about how many critics there are, or where they're positioned, or what Times editor can be rounded up to produce answers. It's about having an institution that is willing to seriously listen to that criticism, willing to doubt its impulses and challenge the wisdom of the inner sanctum. Having the role was a sign of institutional integrity, and losing it sends an ambiguous signal: Is the leadership growing weary of such advice or simply searching for a new model? We'll find out soon enough.

I leave this job plenty aware that I have opinions — especially about partisan journalism — that don't always go over well with some of the media critics in New York and Washington. I'm not prone to worry much about stepping in line with conventional thinking. I try to hold an independent voice, to not cave to outside — or inside — pressure, and to say what I think, hopefully backed by an argument and at least a few facts. In this job, I started to know which columns would land like a grenade, and I'm glad to have stirred things up. I'll wear it like a badge.

Thanks to the many editors and reporters inside the building who took my questions and answered them fairly and professionally. Thanks to my dedicated and wise assistant, Evan Gershkovich, whom I am grateful to have had by my side. Thanks to Eric Nagourney, my copy editor, who saved me many times from fumbling over my own words.

And thanks most of all to the thousands of readers who kept their concerns coming and kept me on my toes.

All right, enough.

Time to rip off the Kevlar and turn out the lights.

The Public Editor

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Friday Mailbag: Manchester, Stereotypes and Social Security Math

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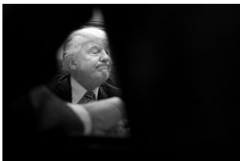
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




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